

Article by Rosemary O'Shea

WITNESS

Director Peter Weir

INTRODUCTION

Peter Weir is an Australian director whose films are internationally renowned. In *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), *The Mosquito Coast* (1986) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), he has created films that deal with groups under pressure. In *Witness* (1985) he provides the film audience with a window onto the world of the Amish in America. An Anabaptist Christian denomination particular to North America, the Amish are a devout, peaceful people. They keep themselves separate from the rest of society, believing that worldliness in the form of such modern developments as cars, tractors, electricity and telephones will distract them from devotion to God and living a simple life. Predominantly farmers, the Amish preserve traditional ways, wear plain, old-fashioned clothing and have a strong, supportive community spirit. This unites them and creates an intense sense of belonging.

Identity and Belonging in Witness

Witness presents two contrasting worlds to viewers – gentle Amish farm life and the seedy world of big city crime and crime fighters. Weir's film explores what it means to belong to these groups. He shows the moral certainty and strong bonds that come from belonging to a group which is different from the mainstream, as if this separation helps people achieve clarity about who they really are.

A personal sense of self may be at odds with others' opinions of you. People make judgements based on other people's appearance and the groups they belong to. These stereotypes can be inaccurate and simplistic. In *Witness*, this is exemplified by the tourists' amusement at the Amish. It is depicted also through the characters of Schaeffer and McFee, for whom being senior police officials provides an effective mask for their real identities as corrupt officers.

Weir explores the role that choice plays in determining identity. It becomes clear in the film that to be a member of a group is a powerful determinant of your sense of self. Values, attitudes and behaviours that have been instilled since childhood are internalised and not easily altered. Powerful cultural barriers exist between people from different groups, which affect their ability to form close relationships.

The title of the film is worth considering in terms of the Context *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*. These two disparate groups are reluctantly connected when the boy, Samuel, witnesses a murder. The duty in Amish life is to bear witness to God's teaching. This is a binding force in their culture. When the entire community witnesses Schaeffer's crime and corruption it is enough to defeat him. This is a powerful victory for the pacifist, anti-violence stance of the Amish, and Weir gives a final endorsement to the strength and goodness of the group.

IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

Witness explores a number of key ideas relevant to the Context *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*. These are outlined below and will be developed further in the following section.

Overview of key ideas and arguments

The Amish have resolutely chosen to separate themselves from mainstream American society. This choice demands significant sacrifices, not only of modern conveniences, but sometimes of full self-expression. Nonconformity by Amish members is not tolerated as this would compromise their separate identity and what makes them unique as a social group. However, as *Witness* shows, there is great support and acceptance for those who belong.

Most people define their identity by the social group (or groups) to which they belong. John Book, his sister Elaine and the police officers, Carter and Schaeffer, are all products of a modern, complex world which requires them to come into daily contact with violence and corruption. The simple moral clarity of Amish life is denied to them. In this wider society, choosing to belong to a group

such as the police force can mean the chance to do good by fighting crime. However, it can also involve acts of violence and corruption in the pursuit of power and money.

The film depicts the clash of these two cultures, exploring how people behave when they are estranged from their accustomed milieu and exposed to the scrutiny of strangers who are inclined to judge them by their allegiances. *Witness* also shows that a growing understanding between people from different cultures can force a painful evaluation of one's own values, beliefs and sense of self.

Analysis of key ideas and arguments

Self-fulfilment and belonging to a group

'No man is an island', metaphysical poet John Donne tells us in his *Meditation VII*. Humans are social beings who thrive through their connections with others. We start life in family groups and identify ourselves as members of national and ethnic groups. We choose to mix with like-minded people in friendship groups and often find much in common with our work colleagues. Our beliefs and interests see us joining political parties, churches and football clubs. There is great satisfaction in associating with people who share something in common with us.

In this sense, the groups we belong to show us and the world who we are. We develop a stronger sense of self when surrounded by people who understand and support us. John Book desires to do the right thing. He never falters in his determination to solve the murder of the undercover policeman and is never tempted to become part of the corrupt officers' group. Book's passion for justice is a fundamental part of his identity and is expressed in the career he has chosen.

Book's strong moral ethic is shared by Eli, who has taken on the support of his widowed daughter-in-law Rachel and grandson Samuel. Eli believes in a literal interpretation of the teachings of the Bible and lives his life accordingly. His behaviour bears witness to the Amish philosophy and belonging to the group allows him to lead a life that seems the most desirable and righteous to him.

Although we can assume that belonging to the Amish community was Eli's birthright rather than a conscious choice, *Witness* shows him as a man who embraces the group and all its teachings wholeheartedly. The Amish community and its beliefs shape his identity and give his life meaning.

Belonging to a group can provide a sense of being one part of a larger whole and sharing this belief with other group members can be very satisfying. Like the police investigating the murder scene, the Amish are shown working together towards a common goal. The raising of the barn, for example, shows the men combining their skills with mutual respect and without competition to get the job done. Here, Weir uses swelling music to establish a euphoric mood as the building takes shape with the work of many hands.

The group may offer support and encouragement. At the funeral of Rachel's husband we witness the subdued grief of the community at the loss of one of their own people. The women gather around Rachel in the dim room while the men stand together talking. This mutual support is seen again at the end of the film when the men run to answer the alarm bell, to come to the aid of whoever needs them. The common purpose and shared values of the group allow the Amish to find fulfilment in their ordered lives.

Even for those who manipulate their position in a group for their own ends, such as the corrupt police officers Schaeffer, McFee and Fergie, there remains the possibility of self-fulfilment. The police force, and the respect that belonging to it confers, serve as a cover for these men to carry out their crimes. These men cynically subvert the general good standing of the police force in the community to continue dealing drugs. As a result, their true identities are not immediately apparent to the world outside their group.

Witness also pays tribute to the family group, showing the strength of family bonds under stress. Book, for example, worries about his sister's fatherless children and her uncertain lifestyle because he understands the value of stable family life. Elaine is generous to her brother, offering her car to him and hospitality to Rachel and Samuel when he needs a place for them to stay. She wants him to settle down and find happiness. Eli and Rachel are full of concern for Samuel and show their love for the child when he is in danger through their

instinctive embraces. The ideas of home and intimacy are important, suggesting that there is no other group that quite fits your needs and knows you as well as your family. The experience of belonging to a family transcends culture and Weir shows, especially through the character of Samuel, that it is a social group which helps to form the individual's identity at crucial moments.

Discussion questions

- Why is Book not even tempted to join the corrupt officers and become rich by dealing drugs?
- In what ways do Elaine and Rachel show that motherhood and family are important aspects of their identity?

Choosing not to belong

The choice to leave a family, religious or political group can be a painful one, carrying with it a feeling of disloyalty. Sometimes, however, rejection can occur pre-emptively, when the choice is made not to join a particular group. In order to live out their beliefs, people may decide to reject the life offered by mainstream society in favour of belonging to an exclusive group.

The Amish tenaciously retain their traditional way of life by cutting themselves off from virtually all that the modern world has to offer. Television, radio, cars and farm machinery are absent from their lives and their 19th century clothing styles symbolise their rejection of progress. Eli articulates this best. 'Be ye separate', he tells Samuel sternly, quoting the scriptural precept on which the Amish base their lives.

This old-fashioned lifestyle is a cause of amusement to the American public, who regard them as an endearingly quaint tourist attraction. However, Weir seems to endorse the Amish way, by showing that they function simply but effectively. Samuel shows Book how the water pump and the grain storage system work and there is an air of quiet prosperity about the farms. The film presents the unhurried pace of Amish life almost idyllically, with shots of blue skies and clear water. It is very effectively contrasted with the sleazy Happy Valley nightclub and the dangerous men's room at Penn Station.

With these contrasting landscapes and social groups, Weir challenges the idea that progress and modernity are indisputably beneficial. There is visual humour in the shot of the Amish buggy travelling slowly, a long line of traffic in its wake. Weir also contrasts, more seriously, what it means to be a single mother in both of these groups. Rachel is supported by a loving, stable community while Elaine's crowded, chaotic house plays host to a succession of lovers and surrogate fathers for her boys. To choose separation from a volatile and dangerous world brings its own security. Weir compares the relative value of the two communities with definite nostalgia for a simple way of life no longer possible for most people in modern Western societies.

It is not easy to gain acceptance into an exclusive group. We hear Eli's concern when the wounded Book is brought to hide at the farm. Contact with the 'English' is dangerous in his eyes. The solemn Amish folk smile at the spectacle of Book dressed in the 'plain' clothing of the community. It is his embarrassed scowl as much as the ill-fitting suit that clearly shows he does not belong. Book and his hosts both understand that he is putting his real identity, purpose and police officer's ways on hold for a while. Only his carpentry skills, which the Amish regard as useful, win him acceptance among the men. As Rachel tells him, 'Whacking's not much use on a farm'. Eli's final blessing has been hard-won. 'You be careful out among them English', he tells Book. This shows that he sees the policeman as changed and vulnerable, not quite Amish but no longer really belonging to the dangerous outside world.

When the three corrupt police officers, a secretive clique in the police force with their own sense of exclusivity, descend on the community, the Amish are forced to confront the evil that they try to avoid. They bring no weapons when they run to answer the alarm bell, just their belief in the power of good to overcome evil. When Schaeffer fumbles for his identity card the Amish ignore it. They stare in silent witness at an evil man whose actions, not his status and power, tell them who he is. The film suggests that the Amish community are strong enough to survive the violence and crime that has occurred so close. While they have experienced events unlike any they have previously witnessed, the community remains unaltered and uncompromised.

Discussion question

- How may an expanded view of the world and learning more about other groups change people's understanding of themselves?

Belonging to a group and self-sacrifice

Belonging to a group may mean subjugating your own desires and opinions for the greater good and goals of the group. If the compromise becomes too great, and the group no longer seems to fit with the individual's sense of self, a person may choose to abandon the group. Very often, however, this choice seems too frightening, and people settle for the familiar rather than the unknown, comfortable where they belong and ready to accommodate their identity to the group ethos.

In *Witness*, Rachel becomes stifled by the narrow options before her – to continue as a widow or to marry the mild-mannered Daniel. The intrusion of Book, an outsider into their group, forces her to reconsider her position in the community. She faces a strong sexual desire for a man other than her husband. This desire causes Rachel to question the limitations of her ordered, gentle world and to consider the possibility that outside it she could be a totally different person. As a result, Rachel's manner changes and we see the possible emergence of a more independent woman: she removes her bonnet, the outward sign of her Amish identity, and goes to Book. Such impulses are well under control by the end of the film. The film's final shots see her returned to her bonnet, positioned in the kitchen, accepting that her place is with the Amish.

The decision to join a group may require further choices which may alter the individual's sense of self. Carter and Book have freely chosen to join the police force. This indicates their values based on their sense of who they are. Each man's private ethics are publicly expressed in their desire to belong to an organisation that fights crime and seeks justice. However, their exposure to the evil and violence of the criminal world involves a sacrifice of these ethics, manifested in the counterforce they must use to fight crime. When Book manhandles the suspect outside the nightclub we are encouraged, like Rachel, to be appalled by this display of violence. We respond similarly when he excessively beats the mocking tourist. Book is desensitised to violence; it has become second nature for him to rely on violent force to resolve problems.

Those who defy or corrupt the group must be punished by exclusion. The Amish 'shunning', which Eli warns Rachel to avoid, would cut her off from the life of the community. If she were judged to have offended their laws by her open attraction to Book she would no longer be able to speak and eat with her people. To be set apart from the group in this way would be unbearable for those who live in such a close-knit community. Denied a secure place in the group that has always nurtured them, they may begin to question their very identity. Total loyalty is required if the group is to keep its integrity.

When a group grants power to some of its members so that they can lead, that power may become very attractive. Even among the Amish, the leaders (or Elders) have the authority to make decisions about the lives of other members. We witness their self-importance as they walk under their large umbrellas and leave Eli in the rain. When the power of leadership corrupts those who hold it, the group is used to serve the interests of those who command. This is clearly seen in *Witness* in the example of the senior police officers, McFee and Schaeffer. They retain only the mask of responsible law enforcement officers. Their murders of the undercover policeman and Carter, and their ruthless pursuit of Book, show they are prepared to abuse their authority in the group for their own gain. In order to profit from drug trafficking, they have sacrificed their ethics and the wholeness of their identity.

Discussion question

- In what ways can a group be damaged or destroyed when its members' values or beliefs change?

Identity under pressure

What happens when your sense of self becomes destabilised? When people enter an unfamiliar culture they often begin to question their own beliefs and customs. How difficult would it be to adopt another culture permanently and how would it affect your own identity? Do we freely choose who we become?

Witness shows us how uncomfortable it feels to be displaced from a familiar group, alone and unsupported in a strange community. The film takes the wide-eyed Samuel and his mother through the backstreets of Philadelphia. The audience views scenes of sleaze and violence anew, through the horrified eyes

of the Amish woman and her child. Rachel's prayer over the meal in the hot dog diner shows how out of place she is in secular society. Book's attack on the young tourist is such unlikely behaviour for an Amish person that it arouses the suspicion of the police. Both Rachel and Book stay true to themselves, reacting to the unfamiliar world around them in ways that are consistent with their sense of self – a devout Amish woman and a tough, short-tempered police officer. Their identities have been formed by the groups they belong to; they have internalised the groups' values. Rachel can no more easily become a modern American woman than Book can become Amish. In the end, the power of their established identities is stronger than their desire to be together.

Nevertheless, the film plays with the possibility that Book could live his life among the Amish. His strong attraction to Rachel makes even this hardened Philadelphia cop consider the idea briefly. Just like the audience, he is drawn into the simple world offered by the community, exploring the farm and experiencing nostalgia for a life that Weir presents so idyllically. It provides a potent antidote to his city life. Book is content to work with Eli, make toys for Samuel and adore Rachel silently, almost taking on the role of her dead husband in the household. However, he has few real points of contact with the Amish, apart from his use of hammer and nails. His rage at the irritating tourists shows that he cannot accept the pacifist beliefs of the community. Even when he gulps down lemonade, Book is presented as a man accustomed to grabbing at the pleasures of life. This is contrasted with the small sips taken by the more moderate Daniel. The energy and forcefulness that attract Rachel to Book are the very qualities that make him ill-equipped to truly belong in the Amish community.

Book and Rachel yearn for each other. As the song '(What a) Wonderful World' plays on the car radio, Weir intensifies the emotion of the film. They hold each other as they dance, 1950s style, innocently but with terrible longing. There is a moment of crisis in *Witness* when Rachel is prepared to throw away her world. Having come to love Book, she finds her fundamental values and way of life challenged by her desire for him. The scene in which she is naked symbolises her willingness to set aside all the trappings of her religion and culture in order

to offer him her essential self. It is a measure of Book's greater worldliness and experience of life that he knows their love is impossible.

Although dress signifies identity in *Witness*, the possibility of false appearances is presented as something to be cautious of. At Penn Station, Samuel approaches the Hasidic man confidently, assuming from his clothes that he is Amish, only to find to his dismay that he is a stranger. In the men's room, the murdered drug dealer is really an undercover policeman and the murderer is actually a senior police officer. Weir sets up this confusion in the early scenes to suggest that we cannot rely on appearances to judge who and what people really are. Later in the film, we see McFee standing proudly with his citation in the photograph; despite his crimes he presents himself as every inch a police officer in his uniform. We see Book posing as an Amish farmer and Schaeffer identifying himself as a policeman to convince the Amish that he is to be trusted. Weir suggests that it is not always easy to know another person or to see beyond the disguises we present to one another. Clothes or costumes, in this context, may be a distraction from understanding the truth. Samuel seems wise beyond his years when he tells his grandfather that he can tell a 'bad man' by his deeds. 'I can see what they do', he says sadly. 'I have seen it.'

Discussion questions

- Do you think that Book has changed in any way by the end of the film?
- What future do you predict for Rachel?

Points of view on the Context

The following discussion topics, writing topics and activities are designed to assist you to develop your understanding of the ideas explored in the Context *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*. By discussing and considering different responses to the issues raised by *Witness*, you will learn to articulate your own point of view.

Discussion/writing topics

- The Amish have gained more than they have lost by rejecting the modern world. Make a list of all the advantages and disadvantages that their separateness has brought them before you begin the discussion.
- There is an old saying, 'Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man'. The statement suggests that adult identity is formed by the experiences of early childhood and implies that people have little control over who they become. Do you agree?
- Were Rachel and Book wrong to give up their love? Surely love conquers all? What adjustments would Rachel have had to make to join Book's world?
- What pressures could make an individual decide to abandon a group that has previously been important in their life?
- Consider all the groups you belong to. Which of them have you chosen? Which have been chosen for you? Which of these groups has had the strongest influence on the formation of your identity?

Activities

- In *Witness*, Rachel tells Book some of the things his sister, Elaine, has said about him in their off-screen conversation. In pairs, create the dialogue of this conversation between the two women as they discuss Book. What other insights into his character could Elaine make?
- In small groups, research and prepare an oral presentation on groups which are separate from mainstream society for different reasons, such as remote Aboriginal communities, tiny regional towns, prisoners in jail, exclusive religious organisations or people who live in nursing homes. How does belonging to such a group influence the sense of self of its members?
- Write the reflection that Book might make on his way home from the Amish community. What would he admire about their way of life? What reasons would he give to convince himself that his relationship with Rachel would never have worked?

Writing in Context: Sample topics

Students will be assessed in Units 3 and 4 and in the end of year examination on writing stimulated by the ideas and arguments found in texts studied in the Context *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*. The following topics provide an opportunity for students to draw on ideas arising from their viewing of *Witness* in order to develop their own writing pieces. Written responses may be expository, persuasive or imaginative.

- 1 'It is sometimes hard to know what other people are really like under their masks.'
- 2 'The first group we belong to, the family, has more influence than any other group on forming our identity.'
- 3 'The groups we reject show us who we are just as much as the groups we choose to join.'
- 4 'Cultural barriers can prevent people from really understanding each other.'
- 5 'People need groups and a sense of belonging in order to feel whole.'

THE TEXT

Witness 1985, dir. Peter Weir, 20th Century Fox. Starring Harrison Ford, Kelly McGillis and Jan Rubes.

OTHER RESOURCES

There are many other texts that explore ideas about identity and belonging. It is interesting and useful to compare the ways in which these texts deal with the issues of the Context.

Banville, John 1998, *The Untouchable*, Picador, New York.

Mrs Doubtfire, 1993, dir. Chris Columbus, 20th Century Fox. Starring Robin Williams, Sally Field and Pierce Brosnan.

Wolfe, Thomas 2004, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, Picador, New York.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemary O'Shea, BA, BEd, Grad Dip (Children's Literature), taught English and Literature in Victorian schools for many years and is currently teaching in the School of Education at Australian Catholic University. She is the author of *A Guide to the Literature Exam* (Leading Edge Series, Harcourt Publications, 2005), *Analysis and Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and *Essential English Skills Year 10* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).